

2005 Marketplace E-Report



*An Agenda to Grow North Dakota's
Entrepreneurial Economy*



KENT CONRAD
United States
Senator



ROGER JOHNSON
Agriculture
Commissioner

North Dakota has a proud heritage of self-reliant pioneers who opened a new land and created a way of life for themselves and their families. We need to build on that pioneer spirit, take advantage of the resources we have right here in North Dakota and end the out-migration in our state. It is all about Growing North Dakota from Within.

We believe the key to a stronger North Dakota is within all of us. Our economic prosperity depends on tapping the entrepreneurial spirit that thrives here and putting it to work.

Recognizing the importance of entrepreneurship, we held a summit last year as part of Marketplace 2004. As a result of that summit, a group of leading North Dakotans volunteered to be part of a Task Force. They devised a strategy to develop North Dakota's entrepreneurial culture.

The following pages contain the recommendations of the task force. The report outlines goals to make North Dakota home to entrepreneurs.

Our nation is in an age of entrepreneurship when new job growth is driven by new business start-ups. We can make that happen right here in North Dakota. We hope this report will help North Dakotans act on their dreams, breathe life into their ideas and grow our state's economy.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kent Conrad".

KENT CONRAD
United States Senator

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roger Johnson".

ROGER JOHNSON
North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner

Executive Summary

Entrepreneurship is at the foundation of any strategy to revitalize Rural America. Not only are entrepreneurs important to improving our quality of life through new services and products, they can help our communities grow with new income, new investment and new jobs. Entrepreneurs and the businesses they start are a key source of economic growth in the United States. Nationwide, hundreds of thousands of budding entrepreneurs start small businesses each year. High-growth entrepreneurial companies are responsible for two-thirds of all new jobs created.

In short, if North Dakota can grow entrepreneurs, North Dakota can grow its economy.

But how do we cultivate our state so that entrepreneurs and the businesses they start can flourish? What seeds must be planted? What skills should we seek to develop? What can our community, business and education leaders do to encourage new business growth?

Senator Kent Conrad, the Senior Senator from North Dakota, has always been an active supporter of entrepreneurship. For the past 16 years, he has served as organizing sponsor of *Marketplace*, in coordination with North Dakota's Commissioner of Agriculture. *Marketplace* was designed with entrepreneurship in mind – originally, to help those impacted by a declining farm economy to pursue economic development opportunities and new sources of income. The name change to *Marketplace for Entrepreneurs* in 2004 reflects the heightened focus on entrepreneurship, highlighting the vital role it plays in growing our state's economy.

In conjunction with *Marketplace 2004*, Senator Conrad held a Summit on Entrepreneurship to discuss "Growing North Dakota From Within: Creating a More Entrepreneurial Culture." The Summit concluded that by encouraging entrepreneurial growth, North Dakota can grow and diversify its economy.

From that Summit, a group of leading North Dakotans volunteered to be part of Senator Conrad's Entrepreneurship Advisory Task Force. The Task Force was made up of civic, business and education leaders from around the state. A five-person Steering Committee was selected to lead the group through a survey process to gather information and insights on the current status of North Dakota's entrepreneurial culture. Their goal was to assemble a report to identify a common foundation and develop a strategy to foster a greater entrepreneurial culture in our state.

With help drawn from the work of the Kauffman Foundation and the National Commission on Entrepreneurship, topics were generated for Senator Conrad's North Dakota entrepreneurship survey. The following report summarizes the work of the Task Force.

The Task Force concluded that there is not only strong interest, but also a driving commitment to create a more entrepreneurial climate in North Dakota.

This report also goes a step further to propose, based on survey responses, areas ripe with opportunity to grow the entrepreneurial economy of North Dakota.

"We are living in a new "Entrepreneurial Age" – in which entrepreneurs and their companies are transforming the economic landscape. New and emerging entrepreneurial growth companies generate the vast majority of new jobs and innovations in our economy."

— National Commission on Entrepreneurship

Survey Questions with Summaries of Responses

① Teaching Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurs are made, not born. Successful behavior is learned through a variety of experiences. Education can help equip individuals with key attitudes and vital skills. We seek to encourage and empower, to the degree possible, all North Dakota students to consider, explore and prepare for innovation, entrepreneurship, self-employment or small business ownership as career options.

There was widespread feedback and agreement throughout the survey that entrepreneur education must start early and continue throughout North Dakota's education system (K-12). The Task Force concluded that entrepreneurial education should be taught in all disciplines and career fields, including trade and technical schools, as well as colleges and universities. One suggestion was to require schools to teach students an entrepreneur course as part of the curriculum for graduation.

In early education, basic subject knowledge should be a shared priority with encouraging creativity, innovation and problem-solving skills. The importance of self-confidence, and how it is developed, is another critical component of greater tolerance to risk-taking, a fundamental part of entrepreneurial activity. *Marketplace for Kids*, North Dakota's statewide effort to give school children a hands-on business experience, is one example of how schools and public leaders can work together to foster early entrepreneurial interest.



Our education system is geared to meeting specific educational criteria while successful entrepreneurs require innovation and problem-solving skills. The Task Force identified what they described as a “chasm” between successful classroom learning and learning the abilities needed to successfully start a new business. The Task

Force concluded that the gap can be bridged by bringing more real-life experiences to students – such as having more business role models in the classroom, tours of local businesses, and creating more intern and mentor programs to partner students with entrepreneurs.

“One of the best ways to grow your local economy is to encourage more people to become entrepreneurs. And the best way to achieve this goal is via education and training.”

— National Commission On Entrepreneurship

“We commonly teach our children to go to school so they can get a good job. We do not teach them that they could create their own job by starting their own business.”

— Dr. Donna Thigpen, Bismarck State College



Intrapreneuring – The Entrepreneur Within All Of Us

The concept of intrapreneuring involves transforming existing private businesses and non-profit groups into thriving entrepreneurial organizations, with greater productivity, job growth and financial security. For example, there are many existing North Dakota companies that thrive because of the entrepreneurial culture encouraged within the company's employees and managers. Many agree that this allows employees to "own" their jobs, thereby boosting the company's productivity and allowing the workers to share in the company's success. Most agree that an "intrapreneurial" culture is largely a management issue, but there are things that public leaders can do to encourage this growth from within.

Our survey showed strong recognition of the necessity of entrepreneurship, and the requisite entrepreneurial leadership, in the success and growth of existing businesses. Phrases like "visionary leadership" and "it starts at the top" stood out.

There are several instances of companies in North Dakota with managers who have instilled entrepreneurial cultures among their employees and supervisors. They attest to the increased productivity, profitability and employee satisfaction that this creates.

One issue that several members of the Task Force identified as a problem for North Dakota's business climate is a cultural tendency in the state to be overly protective of underperforming companies and their leaders. Public policy can best encourage change and innovation by halting protection of non-entrepreneurial or underperforming organizations.

Vehicles that some members of the Task Force suggested could be used to promote "innovation policies" among existing businesses include business school-based training seminars for executives, chambers of commerce, and trade and professional organizations.

"Creating an entrepreneurial atmosphere in an organization is the job of the people or person at the top. There are dozens of opportunities for everyone in an organization to develop their ability to contribute, but the process starts at the top."

— Tom Shorma, WCCO Belting



Networking – A Necessity

One key step to entrepreneurial success is networking: conversations, cooperation, sharing and problem solving among individuals, groups and organizations. This can best be accomplished in a very rural state with widely dispersed residents through aggressive use of the Internet and on-line message boards, and by annual conferences and initiatives similar to Marketplace.

The Task Force identified networking as an absolute imperative for successful entrepreneurial development. Networking venues are so important to rural areas that public entities should view these venues as important to their survival as other infrastructure needs like water, sewer and power.

Networking is essential as prospective entrepreneurs begin to search for start-up capital, employees and even vendors to supply their materials. Through networking, entrepreneurs can share information with each other, assessing their markets and available technology, allowing them to share the lessons they have learned from their own experience. Networking makes for smarter, wiser entrepreneurs through shared intelligence.

“Networks are the single most critical factor for a strong entrepreneurial region.”

— National Commission on Entrepreneurship

Networking does and should take place in numerous and varied ways: on-line through message boards or e-mail newsletters, professional associations, social gatherings, mentoring and internships. Some specific successes in this area include, North Dakota

State University’s Entrepreneur Society, University of North Dakota’s TechForum, and the Red River Valley Research Corridor Action Summits.

Task Force members highlighted Marketplace for Entrepreneurs as a unique forum that blends networking with hands-on training and business development. It is an example of a successful event in a sparsely populated state with great distances. There was an expressed desire for similar events to be held at more locations throughout the state with time for participants to network.

It was recommended that entrepreneurs have closer and more frequent interaction with the business community and universities. Mentoring relationships were recommended, but demands on executives’ time, distance, and competitiveness were cited as barriers.

“Acquiring the skill as an individual to effectively network is critical. From an economic standpoint, providing opportunities for networking is almost the most important thing a city, region or state can do.”

— Delore Zimmerman, CEO Praxis



Assisting the Entrepreneur at the Start

Incubators are one tool or method to help start-up businesses with a variety of support and technical services. The incubation of entrepreneurs is often likened to the care and nurturing given other life forms in the earliest, most vulnerable time of their life.

The Task Force enjoyed a great deal of consensus on the subject of business and entrepreneurial incubators. The role of entrepreneurial drive, resourcefulness and persistence was highlighted often, and it was noted by many on the Task Force that North Dakota has numerous business-development incubators available. In fact, several Task Force members stated that any business hopeful who can not find their way to necessary resources, services or assistance should consider a less demanding career path. *Marketplace For Entrepreneurs* and the North Dakota Department of Commerce were cited as two sources of comprehensive information.

Most survey respondents cited incubators as very helpful to successful start-ups. However, it was noted that they can be most valuable when they go beyond cheap rent and recognize the real needs of entrepreneurs in the early life of a business.

The Task Force agrees that incubators could be expanded into a virtual network. Under this model, incubators would be wired to colleges and universities as a source of learning. Access to incubator resources, academics and program specialists can be helpful in the very early stages.

There is a strong need for entrepreneurs to learn from other business people in a mentor relationship. Seasoned veterans should be encouraged to become mentors, and new entrepreneurs need to be taught to find and develop mentors. The Small Business Management and Farm Business Management programs were mentioned as successful models of business support networks.

The University of North Dakota, North Dakota State University, Minot State University and Dickinson State University were frequently cited for their entrepreneur services and resources. There was expressed desire to have a similar level of service extended to other parts of the state.

The Wahpeton community sponsors a series of workshops for beginning entrepreneurs where various business leaders are brought in as instructors on various topics. This approach reportedly results in a local network of mentors, encourages peer group learning and support. The Task Force recommended replicating this workshop series elsewhere around North Dakota.

Co-location of state, federal, regional business and economic development resources into "One Stop Shops" was recommended for the major cities (Bismarck, Minot, Fargo and Grand Forks). Since most projects draw on multiple programs, these shops could promote synergy and teamwork among the professional staff in addition to greatly improved access for the public.

"There needs to be a one-stop resource center that can help put entrepreneurs in touch with the critical people."

— Becky Meidinger, Heartland Rural Assistance Program

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Feeding The Capital-Hungry Entrepreneur

Finding money to bankroll any new venture is perhaps the most critical yet least precise function facing an entrepreneur. In states like North Dakota, where venture capital can be scarce, there are questions as to how public policymakers and business leaders should work together to draw new and greater investment to North Dakota's entrepreneurs.

The Task Force generally concluded the fact that while borrowers decry the lack of low-cost money available in North Dakota, lenders have expressed concern about the lack of good projects with favorable returns in the state.

Two-dozen different loan funds and programs exist in North Dakota, and there was general agreement on the Task Force that most borrowers or projects can probably be accommodated. However, it was also a point of great agreement that access to those funds could be improved through more convenient and comprehensive service locations and increased publicity and communication efforts to reach those new to the task of finding money.

The Task Force agreed that the greatest need for capital was at the seed capital or early stage of investment. It was suggested that government might be helpful in establishing more entrepreneur investment funds.

"Many parts of the United States have fewer resources and capabilities to support entrepreneurial companies. These challenges can be particularly acute in rural communities where investment capital is limited, distances between firms can be great, and the total number of entrepreneurs is small."
— National Commission on Entrepreneurship

Some survey respondents pointed to the need for greater education and skill building in the areas of financing and finding capital. Business plans, especially the financial portion, would benefit from additional training. Too many start-up entrepreneurs do not know enough about how to discuss their firm's money management or financing needs. It was suggested that this inability to discuss money openly may have roots in North Dakota's cultural attitudes toward social status, success, income and debt.

Underlying some of the need for adequate research or later stage investment options is the feeling that potential investors in distant cities seem dismissive of North Dakota-based investments. Many on the Task Force feel that North Dakota needs to develop North Dakota-based investment funds. Some suggest that the state develop and focus on clear objectives for the type of jobs it wants to develop, and invest accordingly.

"There are two sides of the investment capital coin – entrepreneurs complain about the lack of capital and investors complain about the lack of deals. Properly set up and managed, a fund could not only increase the investment capital in the state but it could provide a vehicle for potential investors."

— Mark Schill, E-Way



Gazelle vs. Lifestyle? Which to choose? ...Both!

Some North Dakota entrepreneurs pursue what can be called a “gazelle” style of business model. For example, high-tech industries, which are knowledge-based, tend to grow quickly and are often associated with research universities in the state’s larger cities. Others may seek so-called “lifestyle” models of business; these are the micro-entrepreneurs who thrive in a cottage industry that places a greater emphasis on self-employment and quality-of-life issues. Many of these “lifestyle” entrepreneurs thrive in our smaller communities or in remote areas. Both appear to be valid, realistic strategies as North Dakota pursues growth from within.

The Task Force recognizes there are many different types of entrepreneurs, each with valid individual needs. Entrepreneurs and communities need to find the right fit. Communities of all sizes must work on quality of life issues; they must appeal as desirable places to live. But community leaders must also be encouraged to develop the resources they have, while pursuing infrastructure enhancements to improve their business climate.

It was felt that rural communities would do well to focus on development of “lifestyle” entrepreneurs who form small, sometimes home-based businesses. Larger communities, some of which are already centers of significant commercial and university activity, are natural places for “gazelle” style businesses.

Regardless of the differences in the communities and the nature of the businesses they seek to draw, they face similar needs – better business infrastructure. That could be a pool of available workers who are educated and easy to train, or it could simply mean availability of broadband and business cooperatives to help lower the cost of bulk purchases.

The Task Force largely agreed that no matter the size of the community or the style of the business, technology is a great need for entrepreneurs. It is through technology, like the Internet, that businesses in North Dakota can cross long distances to make sales, forge partnerships and find new markets.

“There will always be the fast growth species and the slow growth species that fill the niches the others can’t do efficiently. We need to create the culture for both to co-exist.”

— Kari Warberg, Earth-In-Kind

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Recognizing and Appreciating the Entrepreneur

Growing North Dakota from within, creating a climate of entrepreneurship, requires broad public awareness, support and involvement. Some say that North Dakotans tend to be too risk averse, and individuals need more encouragement to move their ideas forward within their company, organization, school or community. However, there are some practical steps that North Dakota leaders can take to help build awareness and support for small business growth in North Dakota.

As a body, the Task Force agrees that there are few greater personal traits to the successful entrepreneur than self-confidence and persistence. These are traits that are often learned in the family home at an early age, and later, reinforced in schools. Entrepreneurs must often face many discouraging hurdles – often sometimes wholesale failure – before success is found.

And while it is widely recognized in North Dakota that our citizens are often averse to high risk, the roots of North Dakota can be traced to our nation's earliest and heartiest pioneers. It is also true that agriculture, a very risky venture, is North Dakota's top industry.

"Supporting entrepreneurship often means working to change your local business climate or culture. Like all humans, entrepreneurs want to be respected and supported. Simply acknowledging their critical role in your local economy can have a huge effect." — National Commission on Entrepreneurs

The Task Force recognizes that several things could be done in North Dakota to help encourage and recognize entrepreneurs – and hopefully boost both the numbers of new and successful entrepreneurs.

There is a role for North Dakota's public education system in entrepreneur appreciation. The education system can help lessen risk averseness by increasing skills in preparing business plans and training our students

to discover and evaluate opportunities. One effort that was recognized was the BOSS competition held through *Marketplace* – the statewide contest among North Dakota college students to develop solid business plans.

Also, schools can bring successful entrepreneurs and their products before classes for "show and tell" experiences as inspiration and role models. Field trips can help students develop a sense of place, a connection to the area and an understanding of the region's economy.

The Task Force identified a role for the media to take a stronger step forward in holding up community builders as role models. The business community itself can make a greater effort to recognize those successful firms and give them public awards. One example of that which was cited was the *Marketplace* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award.

"One barrier is certainly the cultural anchor in North Dakota, which prevents us from beating our own drum, promotes us to be skeptical of new and diverse thoughts and ideas, and views success with skepticism instead of celebration."

— Steve Burian, Advanced Engineering and Environmental Services



Cultivating the “Economic Garden” for Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs tend to establish new businesses where they want to live. Sometimes, however, barriers exist that may either encourage or discourage business development and the business creativity and innovation among young adults. There is a place for public policymakers in forging a business-friendly culture and making North Dakota the kind of place where businesses can thrive.

The Task Force’s final analysis finds that quality of life issues are critical to the budding entrepreneur and to the business considering North Dakota as a place to call home.

Several people observed that barriers to entrepreneurial activity in North Dakota are no greater than found elsewhere. Entrepreneurs follow opportunity. But beyond the fundamental questions of the resources and market opportunities available, location choices boil down to quality of life issues: good schools, affordable housing, accessible health care, affordable taxes, available transportation and amenities.

“In our desire to hit economic development ‘home runs,’ we have largely ignored the needs of these vital entrepreneurial ventures. These firms will drive the future of innovation and prosperity in nearly every American community, and, thus, should become the focus of our economic development efforts.” — National Commission on Entrepreneurship

The Task Force believes that entrepreneurs go where they are welcomed and respected among positive minded people. Young adults — those in our population who have the energy, creativity and endurance needed to weather the start-up of a business — are particularly sensitive to a lack of diversity in North Dakota. Differing colors, creeds and cultures are things to be proactively sought, affirmed and valued, not merely tolerated. They want community leaders to ask, listen to and involve them, formally and informally, in community affairs.

Finding policies that would have a positive impact on the family life of an entrepreneur was recommended as a priority by the Task Force.

Medical insurance was cited as a specific example. The individual entrepreneur might be willing to sacrifice their own blood, sweat and tears, but they should not be forced to sacrifice the safety and security of their spouse and children in the process.

Leaders need to coordinate a comprehensive economic development policy approach before they can expect others to follow. Many organizations that want to help need coordination. Several survey respondents recommended forming a bi-partisan Roundtable modeled after the Higher Education Roundtable to identify and prioritize the steps necessary to create a more entrepreneurial North Dakota.

In addition, several Task Force members commented on the need to reconsider economic development approaches that are too focused on the recruitment model. Too much energy and money can be spent trying to attract an outside business to move to North Dakota while we could be dedicating more effort towards fostering a business climate to grow our communities and our state from within.

“If we worked as hard to support existing entrepreneurs as we do to attract that outside glamorous business, we might have a better climate to foster business success. We may have to re-think the whole model of economic development we are using; successful economic development might be more successful from within our communities.”

— Robert Carlson, North Dakota Farmers Union

Recommended Areas of Opportunity

Based on survey responses, along with additional research, the Task Force recommends the following areas of opportunity. In creating a foundation on which to move North Dakota's business growth agenda forward, these recommendations offer the greatest potential to foster North Dakota's entrepreneurial climate and success.

Education

In a new entrepreneurial age, our state's economic competitiveness depends on our ability to cultivate and foster business start-ups. Entrepreneurial education will help us develop business leaders and in turn grow our economy. This needs to take place throughout North Dakota's educational system, taught in all disciplines and career fields, including trade and technical schools, as well as colleges, universities and continuing education. This must be coupled with encouraging the creativity, innovation and problem-solving skills that entrepreneurs require.

Marketplace for Kids is one example of an existing program to encourage entrepreneurial thinking among North Dakota's youth.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- Form a bi-partisan, multi-constituency summit or roundtable that focuses on opportunities to build an entrepreneurial culture through K-12 education.
- Utilize *Career MarketPlace* to feature entrepreneurs in each of the 16 career clusters providing high school students statewide the opportunity to interact in a career fair atmosphere with inventors.

Support Networks & Services

In order for business start-ups to succeed in our state, they need both formal and informal networking structures. Entrepreneurs also benefit from business resources and support services. Several examples of these are already in place including incubators and technology centers at our universities, business assistance centers, community forums and workshops and *Marketplace for Entrepreneurs*.

Interaction and partnerships between universities, businesses and entrepreneurs should be encouraged.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- Work with Higher Ed to develop a statewide network of Entrepreneur Clubs mixing community business leaders, entrepreneurs, faculty and students.

Infrastructure

Quality of place is important to North Dakota and to where people choose to do business. In order to cultivate greater business growth, we need to have the required infrastructure in place. This includes proper access to technology, as well as sewer, water, education and health care.

An additional consideration for businesses is transportation. The new Northern Plains Commerce Centre is an example of infrastructure that will aid businesses and farmers in their growth by assisting with shipping, distribution and logistical needs.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- Realize that all entrepreneurs are not living in North Dakota, work to create environments that encourage immigration of these people through adjustments in the ND Department of Commerce Ambassadors program and other similar outreach programs.

- Support initiatives and policies that foster statewide buy-in for projects, such as the Northern Plains Commerce Centre, that allow the creation of regional centers that focus on large specialized infrastructure demands.

Capital

Capital is critical to start-up businesses. And, while capital is available through various channels, there is an identified need in the area of seed and early stage capital. In short, we need to develop a strategy to encourage greater investment in North Dakota innovation.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- Provide the leadership necessary to foster the creation of a family of North Dakota based investment funds.

Culture

Fostering a greater climate for entrepreneurs in North Dakota means addressing the underlying culture of our state. Creating the culture to grow North Dakota from within requires broad public awareness, support and involvement. We need to acknowledge the critical role entrepreneurs play in growing our economy, encourage risk taking and celebrate successes. Public awareness campaigns and recognition through things like the BOSS business plan competition and the Marketplace Entrepreneur of the Year award go a long way towards creating a culture that supports and celebrates entrepreneurs.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- Encourage the development of a Statewide Entrepreneurial Clearinghouse that assembles and redistributes information that encourages risk taking and celebrates success.

Promotion of Market Sector Opportunities

A critical part of any economic development strategy requires identification and promotion of specific market sector opportunities. North Dakota has some already developed and emerging industries along with abundant resources that make certain sectors a natural fit.

Recommended Implementation Steps

- It is important that we focus our energies on combining our strengths with emerging market opportunities. The following are specific industries poised for entrepreneurial growth.
 - Agriculture has always been a major component of North Dakota's economic foundation. But areas such as organics, identity preserved and value added agriculture present growing opportunities for entrepreneurs.
 - North Dakota is the sixth largest energy producing state in the nation. Our natural resources make this a strong industry, but couple this with our potential for renewable energy, and we could see tremendous growth in our state's energy production.
 - The development of technologies — much of which is in conjunction with our universities — is leading growth in the Red River Valley. The technology sector is predicted to be the biggest driver of new job growth, nationally — projected to make up approximately 60-70 percent of new jobs.

Entrepreneurship Advisory Task Force

Steering Committee

Ellen-Earle Chaffee, Ph.D. *Chair of Entrepreneurship Advisory Task Force*

Dr. Ellen Chaffee is the president of Valley City State University where she has served for the past 12 years. From 1993 until 2002, she also served as president of Mayville State University. During her presidency, both campuses developed new entrepreneurial ventures and won more than a dozen state and national awards. *Computerworld* named Dr. Chaffee one of its “Premier 100 IT Leaders.” She has written five books and penned numerous articles on strategic management, quality, innovation, and leadership. Dr. Chaffee earned a Ph.D. in higher education administration and policy analysis at Stanford University.

Niles Hushka

Mr. Hushka is the CEO for KLJ Solutions, a family of knowledge-based companies utilizing science, engineering, programming and management to provide innovative solutions for clients in the upper Midwest. He is also the CEO of Kadrmas, Lee & Jackson, an engineering, planning and surveying firm with clients throughout the United States.

William Isaacson, Ph.D.

A native of Minot, Dr. William Isaacson is a classic example of an “Entrepreneur.” He spent more than 30 years at 3M Company in St. Paul, Minnesota and was responsible for developing new businesses. While at 3M, he obtained several patents in the field of vision care. Dr. Isaacson continues to be involved in lecturing and consulting in the field of new ventures and entrepreneurship. In addition, he was a member of the North Dakota State Board of Higher Education and has been on the guest faculty at Northwestern University and Babson College. Dr. Isaacson has both B.S. and Ph.D. degrees in chemical engineering from Montana State University.

Annie Kirschenmann

Ms. Kirschenmann is the President and CEO of International Certification Systems (ICS), a North Dakota-based certifier of organic products. ICS currently certifies more than 150,000,000 acres in the U.S. and Canada and is considered the world’s premier organic certification company. Ms. Kirschenmann has also launched FARRMS, (Foundation for Agricultural and Rural Resources Management and Sustainability) a nonprofit education and training service to help interested producers make the transition to organic agriculture.

Thomas D. Shorma

Mr. Shorma is the President and CEO of WCCO Belting, a leading supplier of specialized rubber products. The Wahpeton-based company was founded in the 1950s by Edward Shorma and for the last half century has supplied agricultural and industrial conveyor belts to major manufacturers in the U.S., Canada and countries around the globe. Mr. Shorma is a graduate of the University of North Dakota, and is a Board Member of ND SE Regional Workforce Development Council and a Board Member of ND Roundtable for Higher Education.

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